

Puente Hills Landfill gets ready to become a park via private sector

By Steve Scauzillo , San Gabriel Valley Tribune

PressTelegram.com

- Once the largest landfill in the country, it has been closed for one year.
- It once accepted between one-third and one-half of Los Angeles County's waste.
- Household waste from about 10 million county residents has been diverted to various waste-recycling facilities and to landfills in Orange, San Bernardino and Riverside counties
- On Nov. 12, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors will take up the issue of a master plan for about 1,200 acres of the closed landfill.
- About 1 million cubic yards of dirt has been placed on top of the landfill as part of a final cover.

Source: Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts, Los Angeles County Department of Parks and Recreation

The 10 million residents of Los Angeles County weren't at all spooked about where their trash would go after the monster-sized landfill in the heart of the county closed on Halloween night in 2013.

More than a year later, the Puente Hills Landfill near Hacienda Heights is as quiet as the cemetery next door, signaling a significant if unnoticed twist in the management of household trash.

The activity — garbage trucks crammed with commingled waste and smaller trucks bursting with pure recyclables or yard waste — has shifted to material recovery facilities (MRFs) that are popping up all over Southern California, while some still goes to traditional landfills.

About half the 7,500 tons per day of household waste that filled the nation's largest landfill in 2013 now enters the Puente Hills Material Recovery Facility located in the shadow of the 40-story high rubbish site towering above the Pomona Freeway. The other half gets buried in landfills — not in Los Angeles County — but in Orange and San Bernardino counties, said Chuck Boehmke, Los Angeles County Sanitation Districts Solid Waste Department head.

While not at the "zero waste" ideal urged by environmental groups, the county on Oct. 21 set a goal of diverting 80 percent of waste from unincorporated communities away from landfills by 2025 — equivalent to throwing out three pounds per person per day.

To get the county to its goal, help has arrived from private industry who see dollars in every trash truck load.

For example, Athens Services, based in Industry, expanded its MRF on Valley Boulevard in 2007 to accept more commingled waste. In fact, Athens opened a brand new \$50 million facility in mid-October in the northeast San Fernando Valley — a state-of-the-art household waste-sorting plant, according to trade websites. Waste Management Inc., which has seen profits exceed expectation for six consecutive quarters, recently built a large recycling plant in Azusa at Gladstone and Irwindale avenues.

Advertisement

The connection between the closing of landfills and the opening of material recovery facilities is clear. It is out with the old and in with the new, explained Gary Clifford, executive vice president of Athens Services.

Athens has been busy usurping government's role. Its Sun Valley plant can process more than 330,000 tons of mixed waste every year and will help the city of Los Angeles meet a goal of zero waste into landfills by 2025. The Industry plant can process between 1.5 million and 1.8 million tons of waste a year.

The waste company is expanding operations, with plans in the works to build another mixed-waste processing plant in Irwindale, Clifford said.

Since Puente Hills Landfill closed, Athens saw an increase at its facilities, he said. While landfills still play a role, many more are being run by private companies. Residual waste that can't be sold to overseas markets as recyclables gets shipped to landfills operated by Athens in Rialto, Victorville and Redlands, he said.

Waste Management, which posted a \$270 million profit in the third quarter on Oct. 29, dumps Los Angeles County trash at its El Sobrante Landfill in Corona, in Riverside County.

Nonrecyclable waste that once ended up in Puente Hills Landfill gets taken to landfills in Irvine and Brea, Boehmke said. The Sanitation Districts operate Scholl Canyon Landfill in Glendale which serves that city, as well as the communities of Pasadena, South Pasadena, San Marino, Sierra Madre, La Crescenta, Altadena and La Cañada-Flintridge; and a landfill in Calabasas that serves Los Angeles and parts of Ventura County, Boehmke said.

The Sanitation Districts have a contract with Orange County that continues through June 2016. Boehmke hopes OC will extend that contract. The two sides are in discussions but he would not elaborate on the progress.

Meanwhile, as private trash companies take larger portions of the trash pile, that may raise household trash rates in the future, Clifford said.

"Processing (of garbage) costs more money than source separating but the increase is nominal," he said.

Athens was the first in the county to operate a mixed-waste plant. Its business model allows residents to throw all waste into one bin except for yard trimmings which are placed in a separate bin. The sorting of valuable recyclables is done by workers picking through garbage

as it travels down a conveyor belt inside odor-controlled buildings — not inside one's kitchen.

While it may raise costs, material recovery facilities are more efficient and greener than pre-sorting, he said, because they divert more waste away from landfills which emit methane, a greenhouse gas. For example, since converting Bell Gardens to mixed-waste sorting, the city has increased its landfill diversion rates to more than 50 percent, he said.

Recyclables from various material-recovery plants are usually sent to the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles and sold to overseas manufacturers, Boehmke said. Even fabric, such as an old flannel shirt, gets separated from mixed-waste bins and re-used by garment makers, Clifford said.

"In the future, landfills will have less and less tonnage. There will be more alternatives to landfills," Clifford said. His company is working on anaerobic digestion of "wet waste" that can turn turbines and make power, he said. Future technologies also include extracting methane from waste to power automobiles or electric power plants.

At Puente Hills, methane heats water that makes steam and turns turbines that generate 50 megawatts of power, enough to light 70,000 homes. Boehmke figures the methane will run out in about 15 years.

What will happen to the 630-acre former operating landfill that sits on 1,365 acres? Most will be turned into a park, Boehmke said.

The Sanitation Districts have placed 1 million cubic yards of dirt five-feet deep in the former landfill zone since last Nov. 1, he said. The final cover is 95 percent complete and should be finished by the end of November, Boehmke said. "Then we will be planting, seeding and putting in the final irrigation system so we don't get erosion," he said.

The county Department of Parks and Recreation is working on a master plan for a new regional park that will connect with 25 miles of trails. The Sanitation District will give the county department \$814,000 for that effort which goes before the Board of Supervisors Nov. 12, said Norma E. Garcia, the department's director of planning and development.

"To have 1,200 acres coming into the public domain for a park is really exciting," Garcia said.

Reach the author at Steve.Scauzillo@sgvn.com or follow Steve on Twitter: [@stevscaz](https://twitter.com/stevscaz).

- Full bio and more articles by Steve Scauzillo
- Back to top



Steve Scauzillo